Politics & Policy

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Connectivity and Mobility: The Transformative Impact of BRI on Migration Dynamics in the MENA

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Received: 20 March 2025 | **Revised:** 8 April 2025 | **Accepted:** 12 May 2025

Keywords: BRI | China | connectivity | MENA | mobility | silk road

Palabras Clave: BRI | China | Conectividad | MENA | Movilidad | Ruta de la Seda

关键词: 中国 | 中东和北非 | 连通性 | 流动性 | 丝绸之路 | 一带一路

ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is reshaping migration dynamics in the MENA region and the GCC. This study examines the BRI's impact on migration trends and the socio-economic factors influencing migration decisions. The extensive infrastructure projects—including motorways, railways, and ports—boost connectivity, create economic opportunities, and expand labor markets by attracting workers and easing mobility. As regions become more integrated, cultural exchange and social ties strengthen, further influencing migration patterns. The creation of special economic zones and industrial corridors along BRI routes fuels both internal and cross-border migration. In this context, the study highlights how the BRI's infrastructure development not only facilitates physical connectivity but also serves as a catalyst for economic growth. As new industries and urban centers emerge, significant migration is expected as people seek work in these areas. The study contributes to the understanding of the impacts of BRI on migration in the MENA region.

Related Articles:

Chang, Y. Y. 2023. "China Beyond China, Establishing a Digital Order With Chinese Characteristics: China's Growing Discursive Power and the Digital Silk Road." *Politics & Policy* 51, no. 2: 283–321. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12524.

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Fong, W., and N. Sakib. 2021. "A 'Good' Country Without Democracy: Can China's Outward FDI Buy a Positive State Image Overseas?" *Politics & Policy* 49, no. 5: 1146–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12428.

RESUMEN

La Iniciativa de la Franja y la Ruta (BRI) está transformando la dinámica migratoria en la región MENA y el CCG. Este estudio examina el impacto de la BRI en las tendencias migratorias y los factores socioeconómicos que influyen en las decisiones migratorias. Los extensos proyectos de infraestructura—que incluyen autopistas, ferrocarriles y puertos—impulsan la conectividad, crean oportunidades económicas y expanden los mercados laborales al atraer trabajadores y facilitar la movilidad. A medida que las regiones se integran más, se fortalecen el intercambio cultural y los lazos sociales, lo que influye aún más en los patrones migratorios. La creación de zonas económicas especiales y corredores industriales a lo largo de las rutas de la BRI impulsa la migración interna y transfronteriza. En este contexto, el estudio destaca cómo el desarrollo de la infraestructura de la BRI no solo facilita la conectividad física, sino que también actúa como catalizador del crecimiento económico. Con el surgimiento de nuevas industrias y centros urbanos, se prevé una migración significativa, ya que las personas buscan trabajo en estas zonas. El estudio contribuye a la comprensión de los impactos de la BRI en la migración en la región MENA.

抽象的

一带一路倡议（BRI）正在重塑中东和北非地区以及海湾合作委员会的移民动态。本研究考察了一带一路倡议对移民趋势的影响以及影响移民决策的社会经济因素。包括高速公路、铁路和港口在内的大规模基础设施项目通过吸引工人和缓解流动性来促进连通性、创造经济机会并扩大劳动力市场。随着各地区变得更加一体化，文化交流和社会联系得到加强，进一步影响移民模式。沿一带一路倡议路线建立经济特区和工业走廊推动了国内和跨境移民。在此背景下，该研究强调了一带一路的基础设施发展如何不仅促进了物理连通性，而且还成为经济增长的催化剂。随着新产业和城市中心的出现，随着人们在这些地区寻找工作，预计将出现大量移民。该研究有助于了解一带一路倡议对中东和北非地区移民的影响.

1 | Introduction

Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as one of the most ambitious and far-reaching infrastructure and economic endeavors of the 21st century, strategically designed to enhance connectivity between Asia, Europe, MENA, and Africa through an extensive network of land and maritime corridors (Li 2019, 12). The BRI is a monumental global infrastructure and economic development project that demonstrates the power of strategic investment in transforming economies. This initiative not only builds critical infrastructure, but also stimulates local economies, promotes job creation, and drives regional development. This initiative in the MENA region has profoundly reshaped the composition and patterns of economic and geopolitical dynamics, which reflects a significant transformation in regional connectivity and development trajectories (Zhang and Sheng 2020; Kuptsch and Pang 2019). This article focuses on one of the three systems in the MENA region: the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—a major player in the global economy—which comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Map 1) (Henderson 2014; Ullah 2013a, 2014).

China's meteoric economic rise has been nothing short of transformative. In 2019, its nominal GDP reached 66% of that of the United States, a remarkable leap from just 6.4% in 1978 when the country embarked on economic reforms and modernization. Today, China stands as the top trading partner for over 120 countries and regions, including the European Union, solidifying its role as a global economic powerhouse. Notably, it was the only major economy to sustain growth during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating its resilience and economic adaptability. Projections suggest that, in a best-case scenario, China could surpass the United States in GDP as early as 2031 (see e.g., Tatom 2007). This unprecedented economic expansion is deeply intertwined with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has been instrumental in extending China's economic footprint across Asia, Africa, the GCC, and beyond. By enhancing trade connectivity and infrastructure development, the BRI not only reinforces China's global economic standing but also reshapes migration patterns, investment flows, and geopolitical alliances, particularly in regions like the GCC.

Over the years, the GCC countries have experienced significant migration flows, driven mainly by the demand for labor in sectors such as construction, hospitality, and healthcare (Al-Mekhlafi 2018; Schoenhals 2020; Gonzalez 2020). I argue that the BRI has facilitated physical connectivity between China and the GCC countries and promoted the integration of their economies. For example, the development of the China-UAE Industrial Capacity Cooperation Demonstration Zone in Abu Dhabi (UAE Government 2023), established under the BRI framework, has enhanced physical connectivity by improving trade logistics, transportation infrastructure, and industrial collaboration

MAP 1 | MENA map. *Source:* Ullah (2014), Recreated by author, 2024.

between China and the GCC countries. Chinese investment has driven infrastructure development and economic growth in the GCC, but it has also altered labor supply chains (Li 2020). The arrival of Chinese workers, alongside migrants from traditional source countries, has reshaped the region's demographic makeup and labor dynamics (Wang and Zhang 2018).

Despite a growing body of literature on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its developmental implications, little attention has been paid to how the BRI is reshaping migration dynamics in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. First, much of the existing literature focuses on the macro-level economic impacts of BRI, such as trade patterns, investment flows, and infrastructure development (Wang and Ma 2020; Zhang and Sheng 2020). While these studies are important in highlighting the broader impacts of the BRI on regional economies, they tend to disregard migration issues within the GCC countries. For instance, many studies focus on BRI-driven trade and infrastructure projects in the GCC but rarely examine how Chinese investment influences labor migration patterns, work conditions, or the rights of migrant workers. Second, there is a lack of studies that systematically analyze the drivers, patterns, and consequences of migration flows as a result of the BRI in the GCC countries (Liu and Shen 2018). While economic imperatives remain a primary driver of migration, the role of social networks, cultural exchange, and identity formation is equally significant in shaping migrants' lived experiences and integration trajectories (Glick Schiller et al. 1995). Within the framework of the BRI, these socio-cultural dimensions become particularly salient, as Chinese-led investments and infrastructure projects not only reshape labor demand but also influence patterns of transnational mobility and community formation.

2 | The Gulf Cooperation Council

The GCC region hosts one of the highest proportions of foreign nationals globally, with approximately 30 million expatriates constituting around 52% of its total population (Ullah et al. 2020) (Table 1). In 2019, the region accounted for 11% of the world's total migrant population (UN 2020). This substantial migrant presence underpins key economic sectors, including construction, hospitality, healthcare, finance, and retail, where foreign workers contribute a diverse range of skills, expertise, and labor essential for sustaining economic growth (Gulf Labor Market 2017). The pronounced 'demographic imbalance'—where expatriates vastly outnumber nationals in several GCC states—has been largely driven by sustained high levels of immigration.

TABLE 1 | Total and percentage of nationals and non-nationals in GCC countries (mid-2020).

Countries	Foreign nationals	Percent of non-nationals (of total population)
Bahrain	758,941	51.6
Kuwait	3,374,587	70.1
Oman	1,858,516	40.6
Qatar	2,495,679	88.2
Saudi Arabia	13,583,286	38.8
UAE	8,066,414	86.9
Total	30,137,423	52.0

Source: GLMM's database (https://gulfmigration.grc.net/glmm-database/demographic-and-economic-module/).

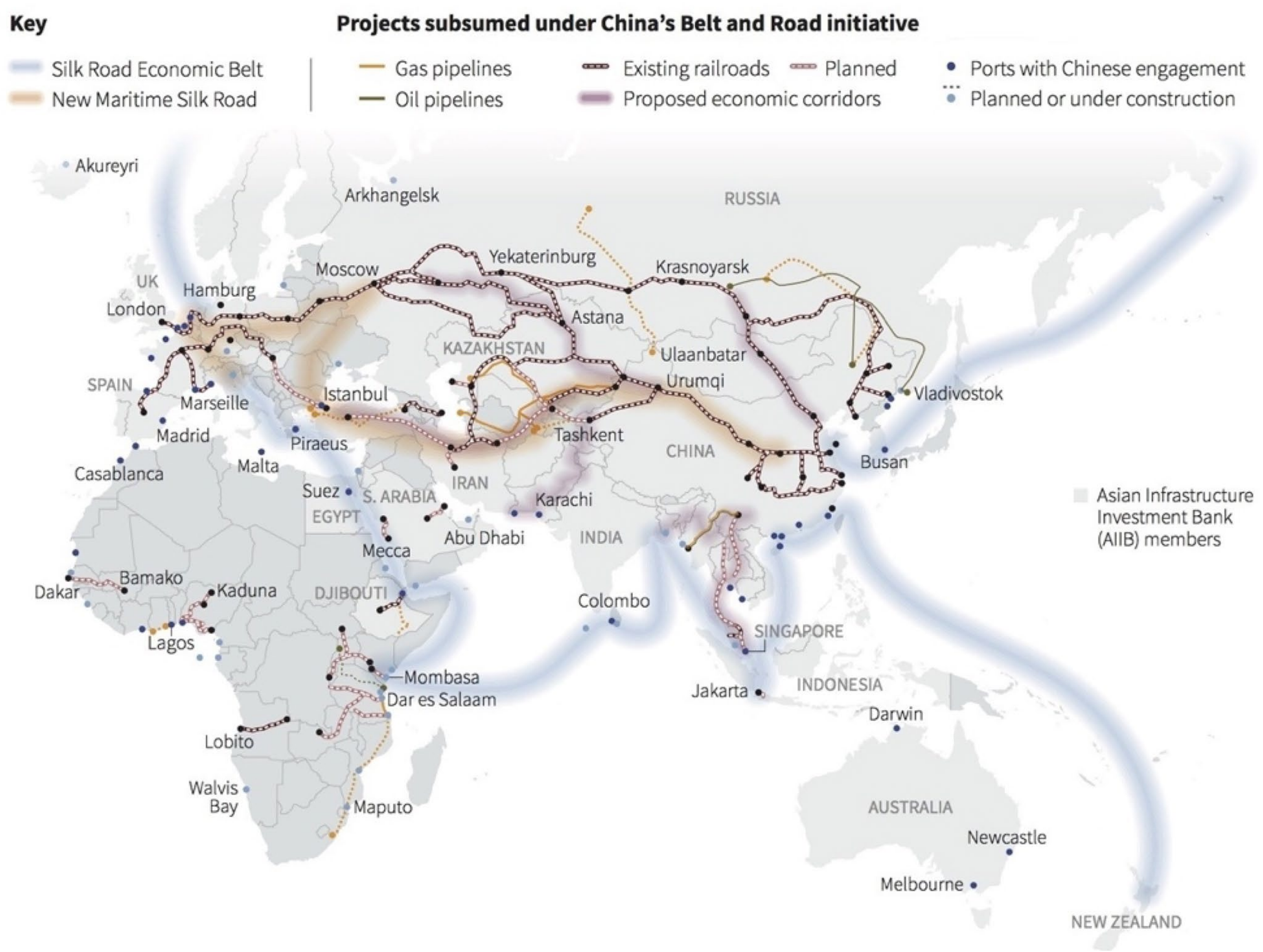
For decades, South and Southeast Asians have constituted the dominant migrant presence in the GCC region, shaping its labor markets, social fabric, and migration governance structures. Workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka have historically provided the bulk of the workforce in key sectors such as construction, domestic work, retail, and hospitality (Kapiszewski 2006; Rahman 2010). However, the BRI is gradually shifting this dynamic by promoting stronger economic linkages between China and the Gulf states, thereby altering labor migration trends. As China expands its economic footprint in the region through large-scale infrastructure projects, industrial zones, and energy collaborations, an increasing number of Chinese workers, engineers, and professionals are being deployed to the GCC. This trend, coupled with greater investments in technology, automation, and high-skilled sectors, raises concerns that traditional South and Southeast Asian dominance in Gulf labor markets may erode over time. BRI-driven projects often involve labor migration models that prioritize Chinese firms and supply chains, potentially reducing demand for South and Southeast Asian workers in sectors traditionally reliant on their labor (Map 2).

3 | Objectives and Methodology

The argument I am making revolves around the idea that the BRI has a profound impact on migration patterns by enabling better connectivity and economic opportunities. The objectives of this research include assessing the impact of BRI projects on regional migration trends and the connectivity created in the countries.

I opted to choose GCC countries in the MENA region for this research due to their strategic geographic positioning, economic significance, and reliance on migrant labor. As key nodes in the BRI's expanding network, GCC nations—such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—have seen significant infrastructure investments and deepened economic ties with China, reshaping labor mobility patterns and regional connectivity. Their economies are uniquely dependent on transnational labor flows, hosting some of the world's largest migrant worker populations, making them an ideal case for analyzing how BRI-induced connectivity influences migration governance, labor market structures, and social integration. The GCC's role as an economic bridge between Asia, Africa, and Europe amplifies the relevance of studying how BRI investments and partnerships alter migration corridors, development policies, and socio-political dynamics in the broader MENA region.

The methodological approach of this study combines a theoretical analysis and a literature review. The selection of literature followed a systematic review process that considered peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and policy papers dealing with BRI, migration dynamics, and socio-economic changes in the MENA region. The inclusion criteria focused on work published in relation to the BRI and the MENA context, as well as the empirical or theoretical rigor of the studies.



MAP 2 | The BRI connecting the continents. *Source:* Mercator Institute for China studies (2023).

Connectivity parameters included the extent of BRI infrastructure projects (e.g., railways, ports and motorways), investment volumes, and changes in trade flows within the MENA region (Figure 1). The mobility variables included data on migration flows, changes in migration policies, labor market impacts, and demographic shifts (Figure 1). Data was collected from international databases (e.g., World Bank, International Organization for Migration), national statistical offices, and case studies from specific MENA countries. Qualitative case studies were used as a method of analysis to understand the context and impact of BRI projects on local migration dynamics.

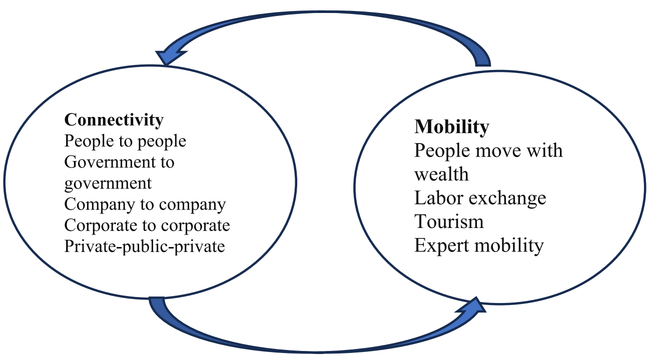


FIGURE 1 | Connectivity and mobility.

4 | Theoretical Understanding

Building on a tapestry of theoretical perspectives, this section examines the far-reaching impact of the BRI on migration while exploring policy responses that promote inclusive development and social cohesion in the GCC countries. Understanding connectivity within the framework of the BRI and its influence on migration dynamics demands an interdisciplinary lens—one that weaves together insights from network theory, transnationalism, and dependency theory.

Globalization theory posits that the world is becoming increasingly interconnected through economic, cultural, and technological exchanges. Globalization theory explains how increasing economic, cultural, and technological interconnectedness reduces national boundaries and fosters global integration (Babic et al. 2020). In the context of the BRI and GCC connection, this theory applies as BRI-driven infrastructure and trade expansion facilitate the movement of capital, goods, and labor, integrating GCC economies into global supply chains and strengthening their economic ties with China. The BRI exemplifies this by promoting cross-border trade and investment, leading to heightened mobility of goods, services, and people. In the GCC context, enhanced connectivity has facilitated the influx of skilled professionals and laborers from various regions, aligning with the globalization narrative of diminishing national boundaries in favor of integrated markets. While globalization theory highlights increased interconnectedness (Chan and Norlund 1998), it often overlooks the uneven distribution of benefits. In the GCC, while certain sectors have thrived due to BRI-induced globalization, others—particularly local labor markets—may face challenges from an oversupply of foreign labor, potentially leading to social tensions (Chey 2019, Chey et al. 2019).

Dependency theory argues that global economic structures create unequal relationships where developing countries (Chan et al. 2008) remain reliant on more developed nations for capital, technology, and trade. This theory applies as GCC countries increasingly depend on Chinese investments and infrastructure projects, potentially limiting their economic autonomy while integrating further into China's geopolitical and economic sphere (Atkins et al. 2023). The BRI's investments in the GCC's infrastructure can be viewed through this lens, where GCC countries might become reliant on Chinese capital and technology. For instance, large-scale projects funded by Chinese entities could lead to economic dependencies, influencing local policies and economic strategies. While dependency theory sheds light on potential imbalances, it may underestimate the agency of GCC countries (Hillman 2020). Nations like the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have leveraged BRI investments to diversify their economies beyond oil dependence, suggesting a more reciprocal relationship than dependency theory might indicate.

Transnationalism explores the complex web of ties and interactions that connect individuals and institutions across national borders. Transnationalism theory explores how people, capital, and ideas move across national borders, creating sustained social, economic, and political linkages beyond state boundaries. In the context of BRI and GCC connectivity, this theory applies as Chinese investments, trade networks, and labor mobility facilitate enduring transnational ties, shaping migration patterns, economic interdependence, and cross-border business collaborations between China and GCC nations (Zhang and James 2023). The BRI has facilitated such connections by enabling the movement of businesses, cultural exchanges, and labor across regions. In the GCC, this is evident in the diverse expatriate communities that have emerged, contributing to a blend of cultures and the creation of transnational social spaces (Djankov 2016). While transnationalism emphasizes cross-border linkages, it may not fully account for the challenges of integration within host countries. In the GCC, the vast presence of expatriate communities can lead to parallel societies, where integration is limited and social cohesion is challenged.

Network theory examines how nodes (individuals, groups, or organizations) are connected within a network and how these connections influence behavior and outcomes. Network theory examines how individuals, organizations, or states are interconnected within a system and how these connections influence resource flows and decision making (Ullah 2013b). In the context of the BRI and GCC connectivity, network theory applies as the BRI creates a vast web of economic and trade linkages, facilitating investment, labor migration, and diplomatic ties between China and the GCC, while also highlighting power asymmetries in these relationships (Guo et al. 2023). The BRI is seen as creating a vast network of trade routes and economic partnerships. In the context of the GCC, this has led to the establishment of new business networks, facilitating the flow of capital and labor. While network theory highlights the importance of connections, it may overlook power asymmetries within the network. In the BRI context, China's dominant position could lead to unequal relationships, where GCC countries might have limited influence over the terms of engagement (Chang 2019).

The GCC countries have actively engaged with the BRI to enhance their infrastructure and economic diversification efforts. For example, the UAE has become a central hub in the BRI's maritime route, attracting investments in ports and logistics centers. This has led to increased migration of skilled professionals to manage and operate these facilities, illustrating the premise of globalization theory of interconnected markets. However, this engagement also reflects aspects of dependency theory, as reliance on Chinese investments grows. The influx of foreign labor and capital creates transnational networks, reshaping the social fabric of GCC societies. Network theory also helps explain the new economic and social linkages formed, but it is crucial to remain cognizant of the power dynamics inherent in these relationships.

5 | The BRI and Connectivity Understood

The BRI is largely underpinned by large-scale infrastructure projects that are estimated to be worth up to a trillion dollars in Asia, MENA, and Europe (Perlez and Huang 2017). Some describe this as the modern version of the Marshall Plan, which is expected to create new markets for Chinese steel, cement, and machinery (Bruni 2019; Perlez and Huang 2017). Tom Miller (2017, 12) notes that "the BRI is beginning to create useful infrastructure that will enable new trade routes and better connectivity between and among the 68 BRI member countries". Demographically, the initiative includes the two most populous countries in the world—China and India—as well as five other nations with more than 100 million inhabitants (Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Russia and the Philippines) (Xiao 2024). Together, these seven countries make up 77.4% of the BRI's total population and 48.2% of the world's population. The BRI also includes some of the smallest countries in the world: 15 nations have a population of between 5 and 10 million, and 22 countries have fewer than five million inhabitants (Bruni 2019). The UNDESA (2017) forecasts that the BRI population will reach nearly 5.2 billion by 2030 and 5.6 billion by 2060, assuming no migration. Despite this growth, the natural population growth rate in the BRI is expected to be lower than in the rest of the world, leading to a decline in the share of the global population to 60.6% by 2030 and 54.8% by 2060 (Bruni 2019).

Connectivity in relation to the BRI refers to physical (development of infrastructure such as roads, railways, harbors and airports), digital (development of telecommunications and digital infrastructure, such as fiber optic cables and 5G networks, to improve internet access and digital communication), financial (strengthening financial integration and cooperation, including the establishment of financial institutions, facilitating cross-border investment and currency exchange), People-to-People (cultural exchange, cooperation in education and tourism), trade (efforts to reduce trade barriers, harmonize standards and improve trade facilitation) and political (alignment and harmonization of policies, regulations and standards between BRI countries; World Bank 2024). Mobility refers to several interconnected aspects such as the development of infrastructure through the construction of roads, railways, ports, and airports to improve the physical movement of goods and people (UNESCAP 2017). Labor and talent exchanges facilitate the free movement of skilled labor and professionals between BRI countries, including visa facilitation, mutual recognition of qualifications, the promotion of labor mobility agreements, and tourism.

Investment flows promote cross-border investment and financial cooperation, including the establishment of new financial institutions and mechanisms to support infrastructure projects. Harmonization of policies and regulations between BRI countries reduces barriers and creates a more integrated economic area. Cultural exchanges improve people-to-people relations through cultural exchange programs, heritage preservation projects, and cultural diplomacy initiatives.

Connectivity has significant implications for aspects of migration, and exploring this intersection requires recourse to different theories and scholarly perspectives. For example, BRI facilitates labor migration and talent exchange to redress imbalances in the labor market (Wang 2019). Christopher Dent criticizes the BRI's infrastructure-centric approach for exacerbating inequalities and environmental degradation, which could influence migration patterns (Tudoroiu 2023).

Connectivity refers to the degree of interconnectedness between regions, nations, or communities in the form of physical, digital, economic, and social links (UNESCAP 2017). Connectivity in relation to BRI is made up of five routes (three land routes and two sea routes) (Nedopil 2023). The BRI strategically utilizes several corridors to improve connectivity with Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The overland corridor through Central Asia and Russia to Europe, along with the route linking China to the Middle East via Central Asia, underscores Beijing's strategic ambition to economically integrate these regions. The expansive scope of the BRI is further evident in its extensions into Southeast and South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and maritime routes through the South China Sea that bridge Europe and the South Pacific (Hoh 2019).

6 | Connectivity and Mobility: MENA and the GCC

The BRI is gaining momentum amid the growing significance of the MENA region, shifting economic dynamics, evolving geopolitical relations, and regional development trends (Ullah 2014). Historically, the MENA region has played a role in global trade due to its strategic location. The BRI builds upon the historical legacy of the Silk Road by revitalizing ancient trade routes and fostering economic cooperation (He 2020). However, a key concern is the rising indebtedness of participating countries, which risk becoming heavily reliant on Chinese loans. Many scholars argue that this dependence creates a "debt trap," wherein countries struggle to repay their obligations, enabling China to exert influence over their economic and political decisions (Hurley et al. 2018; Brautigam 2019; Kennedy and Parker 2015).

China has signed agreements with 21 countries in the MENA region, especially 18 Arab countries, to cooperate on BRI-related projects. In 2023, Middle Eastern countries accounted for 23% of engagement in BRI, with the aim of increasing their cooperation with China (Eslami and Papageorgiou 2023). According to the China BRI Investment Report 2021, about 23% of Chinese investment projects under the BRI in 2021 focused on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (China Silk Road Information Service 2022; Li and Wang 2021). Investments in ports, railways, and motorways facilitate more efficient trade routes, reduce transport costs and transit times for greater economic integration within the region and with global markets (see Figure 2; Fulton 2017; Mitra 2017). However, this has been widely viewed as a concern that participating countries are becoming financially dependent on China, which may lead to a potential loss of economic sovereignty (Hurley et al. 2018). The large infrastructure projects can overshadow local needs, which could lead to environmental degradation and the displacement of communities (Kennedy and Parker 2015). There are claims that these projects primarily benefit Chinese companies and workers rather than the local population (see e.g., Brautigam 2019). Economic ties with China may strain GCC countries' relations with other global powers, which could lead to regional instability (Fulton 2017).

6.1 | Economic Impact

In 2018 and 2019, the EU remained the dominant trade partner for MENA countries in goods, with total trade values significantly higher than those with China. However, while EU trade with MENA declined from €494 billion in 2018 to €444 billion in 2019, China's trade increased slightly from €234 billion to €241 billion, reflecting its growing economic engagement in the region (Table 2).

The BRI has triggered up to USD 1 trillion in investments worldwide in the last ten years and created more than 3000 projects and 420,000 jobs, and eventually the BRI will increase global GDP by $7.1 trillion per year by 2040 (Haiming 2024). For example, there is an ongoing debate about a job creation development project and the associated cost-effectiveness of job creation. Some argue that the project requires $20,000 to create a single job, while others claim that similar results can be achieved at a much lower cost, typically between $500 and $3000 per job. The BRI has led to increased cooperation in the energy sector, with Chinese companies investing in oil and gas projects in countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Besada and Salam 2018; Ullah and Ferdous 2023).

Trade Relations: The BRI has strengthened economic ties between China and the GCC. Notably, Asia now absorbs over 70% of total GCC oil and gas exports, with China alone accounting for 20%. This deepening trade relationship has bolstered economic growth in the region (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2024). Tourism Revenue: In 2023, GCC countries received approximately 68.1 million international tourists, generating

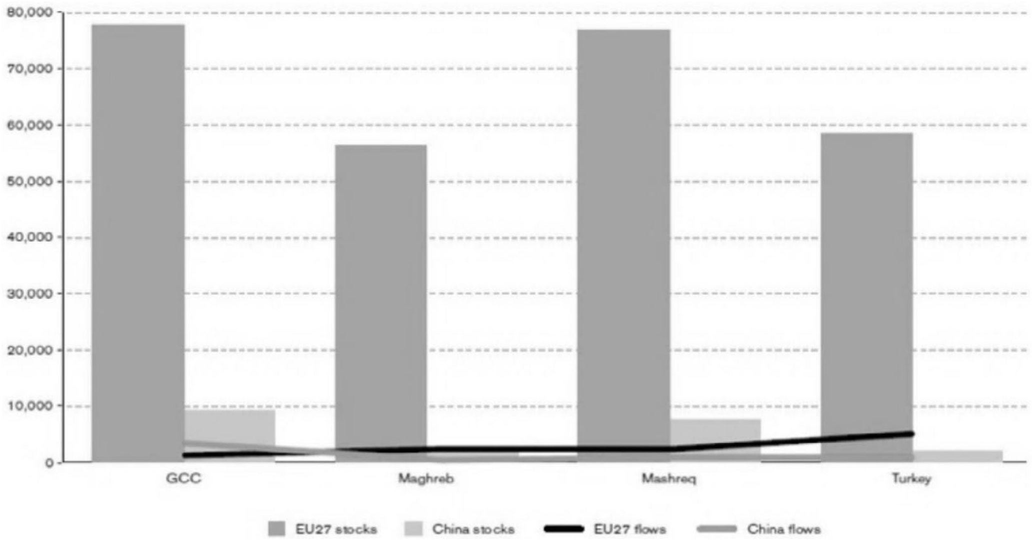


FIGURE 2 | Inward FDI stocks and flows of MENA from the EU and China, 2018 (EUR million). *Source:* Sidło (2020).

TABLE 2 | MENA/China trade in goods (EUR million).

	2018	2018	2019	2019
	EU	**China**	**EU**	**China**
GCC	€ 142,287	€ 150,881	€ 129,083	€ 158,690
Maghreb	€ 112,798	€ 16,732	€ 102,958	€ 12,328
Mashreq	€ 99,441	€ 46,859	€ 82,455	€ 49,987
Turkey	€ 139,521	€ 20,010	€ 129,215	€ 19,522
TOTAL	€ 494,047	€ 234,482	€ 443,711	€ 240,527

Source: International Monetary Fund (2020).

$110.4 billion in revenue. This marked a 28.2% increase in tourism revenue compared to 2019. While not solely attributable to the BRI, enhanced infrastructure and connectivity under the initiative have likely contributed to this growth (Ful 2017; Zawya 2024).

Tourism Exchange Between China and the GCC: Passenger Traffic: Dubai International Airport (DXB) reported an 8% increase in passenger traffic in the first half of 2024, totaling 44.9 million passengers. Notably, traffic from China rose by 80% year-on-year, reaching 90% of 2019 levels. This surge indicates a significant uptick in travel between China and the GCC, potentially facilitated by BRI-led initiatives (Reuters 2024). Tourism Cooperation: The BRI aims to boost tourism among participating countries by improving infrastructure and fostering cultural exchanges. This has led to increased tourist flows and destination development along the Silk Road, benefiting GCC countries (PMC 2024).

China has invested in the Red Sea Gateway Terminal, a collaboration between COSCO Shipping Ports of China and the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia to improve maritime infrastructure in the Islamic port of Jeddah and enable smoother logistics and trade operations in the region (Xinhua 2023; Wang and Ma 2020). For example, in MENA, China's investment in the TEDA area of the Suez Canal Authority and the operation of the new port terminal in Haifa Bay (Xinhua 2023). In 2021, Iraq received the highest BRI funding for infrastructure projects at USD 10.5bn, with a further USD 10bn for Kurdistan's infrastructure (Ullah 2024), while the USD 400bn strategic partnership between Iran and China includes the joint development of Chabahar port and a new oil terminal near Jask (The Diplomat 2020). The development of trade corridors and logistics hubs has reduced trade barriers and improved the flow of goods, capital, and technology between the GCC countries and their trading partners along the BRI routes (Wu 2019).

Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait have historically relied on foreign labor to support their rapid economic development, with expatriates constituting a substantial portion of their populations. For instance, in Qatar and Kuwait, migrant workers make up a significant majority of the workforce (Li and Zhang 2017, Chan 2012). The expansive infrastructure projects and enhanced connectivity have further intensified these migration patterns by creating new economic opportunities that attract foreign labor. In Oman, Chinese investments in port development, such as the Duqm Port project, have not only bolstered trade but also led to an influx of skilled and semi-skilled workers to manage and operate these facilities (Fulton 2017). In 2015, Qatar's exports totaled $5.24 billion, while imports stood at $3.7 billion. Trade between China and Qatar has grown steadily, reaching $11 billion in 2019.

Their economic partnership reflects a well-established strategic model—anchored by energy as the foundation, supported by infrastructure development, and increasingly driven by finance and investment as emerging frontiers. As of recent data, more than 14 wholly owned Chinese enterprises operate in Qatar, alongside 181 Qatari-Chinese joint ventures, signaling deepening bilateral engagement. China continues to be a primary destination for Qatari investments, particularly in sectors such as shipbuilding, manufacturing, petrochemicals, technology, hospitality, tourism, and financial services. Concurrently, Qatar has enhanced its appeal to foreign investors by permitting 100% foreign ownership across various sectors and industries (Chaziza 2020, Li and Zhang 2017). In a significant step toward institutionalizing this cooperation, the Qatar Chamber of Commerce and the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade signed an agreement in April 2017 to bolster private sector collaboration. That same month, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) enabled the Qatar Chamber to join the Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce, further institutionalizing Qatar's role in the Belt and Road Initiative and expanding avenues for trade and investment between the two nations (Chaziza 2019).

Bahrain International Airport, which has recently undergone extensive expansion to boost tourism and logistics by 2020, serves as a key regional transport hub and an ideal location for Chinese order fulfillment centers along the NSR 84. Several leading Chinese corporations—including Huawei, CPIC Abahsain Fiberglass, China Machinery Engineering Corporation, and CIMC—have established a significant presence in Bahrain, underscoring the deepening economic ties between the two countries. Notably, Huawei relocated its regional headquarters to Bahrain in 2009 and has since played a central role in advancing the Kingdom's 5G infrastructure (Chaziza 2020). Bilateral trade between China and Bahrain has also witnessed steady growth, increasing from $1.3 billion in 2018 to $1.6 billion in 2019, reflecting the broader trajectory of China's expanding economic footprint in the Gulf region. By 2020, around 600 Chinese companies were registered in Bahrain, with total investments rising from $50 million to $400 million. The Bahrain-China Joint Investment Forum (BCJIF), established in 2010, continues to strengthen economic ties, while 18 Chinese commercial agencies, including BOC, now operate in Bahrain (Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 2023).

Kuwait is investing $130 billion in Silk City (Madinat al-Hareer), a transformative business hub designed to link Europe and Asia along the New Silk Road (NSR). Scheduled for completion by 2035, this ambitious project will feature a 1001-m skyscraper and will be jointly developed by Kuwaiti and Chinese enterprises as part of the BRI (Rasel et al. 2020). The 36 km Sheikh Jaber Causeway, already under construction, will connect Silk City to the rest of Kuwait, enhancing regional connectivity. Strategically located in northern Kuwait's Subiya region and Bubiyan Island, spanning 1140 km^2, Silk City is set to become a key trade and logistics hub, strengthening links between China and Europe (Wu 2015). Two of its nine approved projects are in the Middle East, specifically in Oman, both categorized under transport. The first, the Duqm Port Commercial Terminal and Operational Zone Development Project, has an estimated cost of $353 million, with the AIIB covering 75% ($265 million). The second, the Railway System Preparation Project, is valued at $60 million, with AIIB financing 60% ($36 million). In 2016, AIIB allocated $300 million to expand Duqm Port and support Oman's first rail system. Chinese investments in Oman now account for more than half of all foreign direct investment (FDI) (Rakhmat 2014).

The transit time for goods transported by sea from China to the countries participating in the BRI is expected to halve (Smith 2018) once alternative modes of transport such as rail are introduced as part of the BRI (Jones and Wang 2019). Studies suggest that for every day of delay in the transport of goods, trade is expected to decrease by 1% (Garcia 2020). For example, the China-Europe Railway Express has increased trade between China and Europe (Chen and Li 2019). While exact data is not available, the BRI-GCC is following the same path.

Dubai's Jebel Ali Port, one of the largest container ports in the world, has seen a significant increase in trade volumes due to its strategic partnership with China (Khan 2020). Jebel Ali handled 14.47 million TEU in 2023, up from 13.97 million TEU in 2022. This increase has pushed the port of Hong Kong out of the top ten list (Indiashipping news 2024). The Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, has been significantly expanded and modernized with Chinese investment as part of the BRI (Xinhua 2019). The Khalifa Port development project is strategically positioned to transform the port into a key transshipment hub linking China to markets across the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. Reflecting the deepening economic partnership, bilateral non-oil trade between the UAE and China grew by 15% in 2017, reaching over USD 53 billion and comprising 14.7% of the UAE's total foreign trade. On the reciprocal side, the UAE accounted for nearly 30% of China's total exports to the Middle East and approximately 22% of the overall trade volume between China and the region during the same period. Looking ahead, projections anticipated bilateral trade to rise to USD 70 billion by 2020, underscoring the momentum of this expanding economic relationship (Belt and Road 2018).

Qatar Airways has expanded its flight network to more destinations in China to strengthen air connectivity between the GCC region and China under the BRI (Rabinovitch and Saeed 2018). Qatar Airways and China Southern Airlines have entered a new phase of strategic collaboration through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that includes a comprehensive codeshare agreement, aimed at enhancing connectivity and expanding travel options for passengers across both networks (Qatar Airways 2024). The improved air connectivity between Qatar and Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou has facilitated business travel, tourism, and cultural exchange (Mobley 2019; Ullah et al. 2023; Azizi 2024, 5; Merics 2023, 3).

Cooperation between China and the GCC countries has deepened markedly in recent years, reflecting a strategic alignment with the core pillars of BRI—namely, policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, financial integration, unimpeded trade, and people-to-people exchanges (National Development and Reform Commission 2015). Notably, the foundations of this bilateral architecture predate the formal launch of the BRI, illustrating a long-standing pattern consistent with China's broader framework of "economic diplomacy." This approach prioritizes the cultivation of robust trade and economic partnerships while deliberately eschewing direct engagement with political or governance-related issues (Sun and Zoubir 2015). Trade between China and the GCC has increased from just under 10 billion dollars in 2000 to 114 billion dollars in 2016 (IMF 2020). Taken together, the GCC is China's eighth largest source of imports and eighth largest export destination.

Frequent high-level exchanges between Chinese and Gulf officials have played a pivotal role in aligning national development strategies with the objectives of the BRI. A notable example is the visit of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Beijing in August 2016, during which he explicitly identified the BRI as "one of the key pillars of Saudi Vision 2030"—a strategic framework aimed at transforming the Kingdom's economy and elevating China as one of its principal economic partners. Accompanied by a high-level delegation—including the Ministers of Trade and Investment; Energy, Industry and Mineral Resources; Culture and Information; and Information Technology—the Crown Prince participated in a policy dialogue titled "Saudi Vision 2030 and the Belt and Road Initiative: Together for a Promising Future." The visit resulted in the signing of 15 memoranda of understanding (MoUs), all geared toward Vision 2030's economic diversification agenda (Scobell and Alireza 2016). This strategic engagement was further consolidated during King Salman's state visit to China in March 2017, which culminated in the signing of agreements and commercial contracts valued at approximately $65 billion. Also, Chinese and Saudi firms concluded 22 investment agreements focused on joint ventures—many of which were closely aligned with the goals of Vision 2030, underscoring the deepening economic interdependence between the two nations.

6.2 | Economic Corridor

While China–GCC relations align closely with the broader framework of The BRI cooperation, the Arabian Peninsula has yet to be formally integrated into the initiative through a designated economic corridor. Economic corridors form the structural backbone of the BRI, articulating China's vision for transregional connectivity and the modalities through which states can engage with the initiative. Of the six official corridors currently outlined by Beijing—including the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the CPEC, CCWAEC, the China–Mongolia–Russia Economic Corridor, the China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, and the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor—none explicitly incorporate the GCC states.

Nonetheless, the absence of a formal corridor does not preclude meaningful participation. As a Chinese diplomat based in the Gulf has noted, virtually any form of bilateral cooperation can be subsumed under the BRI umbrella, reflecting the initiative's flexible and expansive character. Among the existing corridors, two have strategic relevance to the Persian Gulf: the CCWAEC, which links China with Iran, and CPEC, which culminates at Pakistan's Gwadar Port—historically an Omani enclave—located just over 600 nautical miles from the Strait of Hormuz. These corridors underscore the geopolitical implications of the BRI, particularly for the GCC states. Despite China's consistent framing of the BRI as a purely economic project, its corridors inevitably traverse regions marked by complex political and security dynamics.

The CCWAEC, for instance, stretches from western China through Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, with terminuses in Turkey and Iran. Iran, as a pivotal node within this corridor, offers China not only access to the Persian Gulf via critical logistics and transportation hubs, but also a stable channel for energy imports. This deepening connectivity—especially in the context of Iran's strategic positioning—poses both opportunities and challenges for the GCC states as they navigate a changing regional order shaped by China's growing presence (Fulton 2017).

6.3 | Changing Composition of Migrant Populations

With the advent of ambitious infrastructure projects under China's BRI and other economic initiatives, there has been a noticeable diversification in the migrant workforce. For instance, the UAE and Qatar have witnessed an influx of skilled and semi-skilled workers from countries such as China and various African nations. These migrants are increasingly being employed in sectors such as technology, finance, and services. This diversification is largely driven by the specialized skills required for BRI-related projects, which often necessitate expertise not readily available within traditional migrant-sending countries.

6.4 | Labor Laws and Policies

The changing migrant demographics have prompted GCC governments to reassess and reform labor laws: Traditionally, the Kafala (sponsorship) system in GCC countries tied migrant workers to their employers, restricting labor mobility and contributing to worker exploitation. In response to international criticism and the need to attract skilled labor, countries like Qatar and the UAE have initiated reforms to dismantle or modify the Kafala system, granting workers greater autonomy and protection (Migration Policy Institute 2023). There has been a push to improve labor conditions, including setting minimum wages, ensuring timely payment, and providing better housing and healthcare facilities for workers.

The surge in migrant workers, especially in urban centers, has led to increased demand for housing and infrastructure. To address concerns about substandard living conditions, several GCC countries have invested in developing dedicated labor cities equipped with essential amenities. The growing expatriate population has necessitated comprehensive urban planning to expand transportation, healthcare, and recreational facilities, ensuring sustainable city growth.

7 | Visa Facilitation Programs Post-BRI Projects

To attract and retain the necessary talent for BRI and other development projects, GCC countries have implemented more flexible visa policies. The UAE, for example, has introduced long-term visas for investors, entrepreneurs, and specialized talents, allowing for greater job mobility and stability. Reforms have been made to allow workers to change employers without requiring the original sponsor's consent, thereby enhancing labor market fluidity.

Visa policies between China and the GCC countries have been strategically adjusted to facilitate exchanges under the BRI, enhancing economic, trade, and tourism cooperation. In 2016, China and the UAE established a mutual visa exemption agreement, allowing citizens of both countries visa-free entry for stays of up to 30 days (Consulate General of the UAE in Shanghai 2024). Similarly, in 2018, China and Qatar implemented a mutual visa exemption, permitting visa-free stays of up to 30 days for their citizens.

In return, GCC nations have eased visa regulations for Chinese nationals. The UAE offers a 30-day visa on arrival for Chinese citizens, which can be extended for an additional 30 days. Saudi Arabia has introduced the Premium Residency Program, and the UAE has implemented the Golden Visa scheme, both designed to attract foreign investors and professionals, including those from China (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2023). These programs offer long-term residency options, encouraging Chinese investors and skilled workers to establish a presence in the region. China's participation in the GCC-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations has spurred discussions on streamlining work permits and investor visas, further facilitating mobility and collaboration under the BRI framework (National Immigration Administration of China 2018). These flexible visa policies underscore the mutual commitment to strengthening economic integration, cultural exchanges, and mobility between China and GCC countries.

The more investment, the greater the connectivity; the greater the connectivity, the higher the mobility. In the context of connectivity, migration, and trade between China and the GCC countries, potential intercultural challenges emerge due to differences in governance, business practices, labor norms, and societal values. The GCC countries, deeply rooted in Islamic traditions, emphasize religious customs, hierarchical social structures, and Arabic business etiquette, which contrast with China's Confucian-influenced collectivism, state-driven economic strategies, and secular governance model (Shichor 2020). One major point of contention is labor relations—China's large-scale infrastructure projects in the GCC involve Chinese firms bringing in their own workforce, sometimes bypassing local labor markets and raising concerns over economic inclusion and employment policies (Calabrese and Cao 2021). Differences in negotiation styles and expectations in trade agreements can lead to misunderstandings, with GCC countries favoring relationship-based trust-building while Chinese enterprises often prioritize pragmatic, efficiency-driven decision making (Sun 2019). Cultural sensitivities also surrounding alcohol consumption, gender roles, and public expressions of religious observance may pose integration challenges for Chinese expatriates in the region.

8 | Conclusion

The BRI has significantly reshaped migration dynamics in the MENA region, particularly within the GCC. By enhancing connectivity through large-scale infrastructure projects, the BRI has fueled labor mobility, investment flows, and economic integration, altering traditional migration patterns. The establishment of industrial zones, logistics hubs, and expanded trade corridors has increased demand for both skilled and unskilled workers, attracting a diverse pool of migrants. While the BRI has deepened China-GCC economic relations, it has also raised concerns over labor market shifts, socio-cultural integration, and economic dependency.

Critics argue that the BRI often leads to "debt-trap diplomacy," where participating countries incur substantial debts to China, potentially compromising their sovereignty when they struggle to repay. For instance, Sri Lanka's transfer of the Hambantota Port to Chinese control on a 99-year lease after failing to meet debt obligations is frequently cited as an example of such practices (Centre for European Policy Analysis 2020). Some analysts contend that the BRI serves as a vehicle for China to exert geopolitical influence under the guise of economic development, drawing parallels to colonial-era strategies. The initiative's expansive reach into Africa, Asia, MENA, and Europe has led to concerns about a new form of economic imperialism, where infrastructure investments are leveraged to gain strategic footholds. This perspective suggests that, despite the BRI's stated goals of mutual benefit, it may prioritize China's interests, potentially at the expense of the participating nations' autonomy and long-term economic health (Lowy Institute 2019).

Long before the advent of the Belt and Road Initiative, China and the MENA region—particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council states—shared deep-rooted ties through historic trade routes, cultural exchanges, and maritime linkages. The ancient Silk Road and Indian Ocean trade networks facilitated the flow of Chinese goods such as silk and ceramics in exchange for spices, precious metals, and other commodities from the MENA region (Kuo 2020; Hansen 2012; Dumper and Stanley 2007). These historical interactions laid the foundation for contemporary connectivity under the BRI framework. Modern iterations of these connections—especially through enhanced transport infrastructure—promise to significantly reduce trade costs and increase efficiency. According to recent estimates, the full implementation of BRI-related transport projects could lower average trade costs between corridor economies and the rest of the world by approximately 2.8%, and by 3.5% between countries within the corridors themselves. Reductions in trade costs are most pronounced for regions such as East Asia, the Pacific, and South Asia, reflecting substantial gains in transport time efficiency. Notably, trade costs along specific corridors are expected to decline even more sharply—for instance, along the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor, costs could drop by as much as 10%. These figures underscore the transformative potential of the BRI in reshaping regional trade dynamics and deepening China–MENA economic interdependence (World Bank 2019, 49).

The growing presence of Chinese workers and firms is reshaping the region's demographic landscape, challenging traditional South and Southeast Asian dominance in Gulf labor markets. Debates on 'debt-trap diplomacy' and economic sovereignty highlight the complexities of China's expanding influence. Ultimately, the BRI's impact on migration, trade, and mobility in the GCC reflects a broader trend of global economic realignment, reinforcing China's strategic role in regional development. As economic ties deepen, the long-term implications of this connectivity will depend on policy responses, labor regulations, and the adaptability of GCC economies in managing the opportunities and challenges posed by the BRI.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article, Connectivity and Mobility: Transformative Impact of BRI on Migration Dynamics in the MENA. The research was conducted independently, without any financial, professional, or personal relationships that could be perceived to influence the findings or conclusions presented in this work. The content reflects the author's objective analysis of the subject matter.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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